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Review Of "Face Value: The Consumer Revolution And The Colonizing Of America" By C. Carson

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The book's most innovative and engrossing sections are a series of micro-histories that analyze replica Mount Vernons constructed between the 1890s and the 1960s. It is here that Brandt's skill at describing buildings and her fine-toothed reading of committee reports, newspaper accounts, and period reactions come to the fore to illuminate how architectural choices stemmed from specific views of the past and desires of the present. To give one example, Brandt deftly elucidates why funeral home directors and motel owners, two seemingly disparate groups, turned to Mount Vernon for inspiration in the 1950s. The answer: both were new forms of businesses that sought to move activities traditionally conducted at home (sleeping and mourning) to a commercial environment. By tying themselves to the beloved home of America's founding father, proprietors sought to reassure wary customers.

While the MVLA presents Brandt with a bounded set of actors, it is harder to marshal the general public into a coherent group. As the book explores, artists, architects, designers of elite country houses, middle-class purchasers of Sears homes, business owners, administrators of 4-H camps, and even members of the KKK all found inspiration in Mount Vernon. The cacophony of conflicting ideologies makes it difficult for Brandt to synthesize responses to Mount Vernon. Her solution is to focus on Mount Vernon's multivalence as a symbol. Unfortunately, this leaves the house itself without much power or intrinsic meaning—was there something about Mount Vernon, its architectural arrangement, its sense of place that encouraged specific responses? The main house and the plantation landscape stand strangely mute while replica after replica are constructed around them. Yet, as Brandt makes clear, those replicas tell their own beguiling stories. Her work allows Mount Vernon to take its place beside George Washington, who was himself a multivalent icon.

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Cary Carson. *Face Value: The Consumer Revolution and the Colonizing of America.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. xvi+281 pp.; 31 black-and-white illustrations, notes, illustration credits, index. \$29.50 (paper).

More than two decades after its first appearance this substantial, deeply informed, thoughtful essay experiences its "second coming" (xv). Concerned

with the genesis of the now-familiar eighteenth-century consumer revolution and, more specifically, the emergence and spread of gentry culture or gentility, this renewed iteration of Cary Carson's "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?" remains recommended reading for historians of art, consumption, and material culture; museum curators; cultural anthropologists; and anyone with an interest in colonial American life.¹

After the preface, which offers Carson's rationale for republication and outlines the changes he has made, chapter 1 advances five propositions that seek to answer the question posed in the original article's subtitle ("Why Demand?") by discovering the sources of American colonists' taste for qualitatively new and quantitatively more consumer goods. Dating the advent of novel objects and consumption practices to the late seventeenth century, the author argues that "gentry culture" appeared and won adoption in a "world in motion" that loosened traditional bonds while placing "migrants and travelers" in new situations where they needed "a standardized system of social communications." To fill that need, "status-communicating social performances" took form in "standardized architectural spaces" (35–36). The next four chapters elaborate on and seek to sustain the propositions and two corollaries by explicating a variety of material objects as well as contemporary commentary and images. Chapter 6 extends the author's thesis to explain the unique "rampant materialism" of the early nineteenth-century United States, while the seventh outlines a stage theory of American material culture from the colonial era through the twentieth century. The concluding pages consider a subject that Carson already presciently discerned and addressed in the 1994 original: the implications of today's increasingly unequal society for a nation premised on broad access to material abundance.

The book's structure, its propositions and arguments, and much of its evidence remain unchanged from the initial version. But Carson has incorporated several significant and felicitous additions. Nearly doubled in number, illustrations are reproduced in larger and more legible format, and their captions present more information. Updated and elaborated endnotes constitute a virtual, often annotated bibliography of studies on subjects related to colonial ma-

¹ Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press for the United States Capitol Historical Society, 1994), 483–697.

terial culture. Two influential recent studies, Jan de Vries's *The Industrious Revolution* (2008) and Timothy Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* (2004), are examined critically and at length.² Discussions of consumption by slaves, Native Americans, and some non-British immigrants are included.

Carson happily marries close readings of artifacts and their appropriation and deployment, showing how specific objects and patterned behavior interacted to constitute gentility. He also takes a refreshing position on the much-debated relationship of British metropolitan and American material cultures, contending persuasively that primacy belonged to neither: they changed "as one" (193).

For all his attention to new evidence and groups, however, Carson maintains his approach as well as his interpretation essentially unaltered from 1994. He combines analysis resting on a series of binaries, many rooted in the sociological dichotomy of traditional *Gemeinschaft* and modern *Gesellschaft*, with a trickle-down model, whereby elite trend-setters diffused goods and tastes socially downward and geographically outward in a process of acculturation to European and European-descent free settler genteel norms. Such an explanation leaves little space for autonomous sites and purposes of material culture creation that are emphasized in recent scholarship; *Face Value* regards hybridization and creolization, even among enslaved and indigenous people, only as variations on general rules of gentility. While a desire to inhabit and practice gentility can surely account for some colonists' acquisition and display of objects, the postulate loses analytic bite when stretched to cover stay-at-home as well as mobile people and to incorporate individuals whose ability to purchase one or two genteel-identified items hardly permitted them to stage meaningfully genteel performances.

Nevertheless, this book richly rewards for its plethora of ideas and insights, and for its crisp introductions to many issues in the history of colonial North American material culture. Compared with the original version, it more fully grapples with newer theories and more systematically employs quantitative data to capture both the extent and limits of changes in consumption behavior and resulting material culture. It can provide, too, a fine jumping-off point for research that examines the commercial

networks and retail venues that made goods widely available, and it sets its findings within an Atlantic context to distinguish common attributes from the distinctive British American traits that Carson so ably delineates.

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Matthew Rubery. *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 384 pp.; 39 halftones, notes, credits, acknowledgments, index. \$29.95.

Matthew Rubery's *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* is an engaging history of an understudied sonic media form. Rubery considers the audiobook's place in the social history of sound recording, the emergence of aesthetic norms for talking books, and the ways in which this format prompted discussion about the definition of reading. The result is a text that will appeal to readers interested in sound studies, cultural history, media technology and disability, and the materiality of the book.

The Untold Story opens with Rubery's claim that audiobooks are "one of the few forms of reading for which people apologize," making the reader aware of the surprising complexity of the audiobook as a cultural object (1). As he moves across the history of the talking book, Rubery tracks what he calls the "twin impulses" of the form, toward either reproducing the printed book as closely as possible or overcoming the limitations of the written text by exploiting the expressive possibilities of sound. Rubery pithily concludes that the emphasis of talking books can be placed on either the "talking" or the "book" (3). The tension between these impulses is a recurring theme of the book, along with controversies over whether listening qualifies as a form of reading (20).

The Untold Story unfolds chronologically, with the historical development of the audiobook divided into three sections. The first section concerns the early history of the phonograph and situates talking books within a nineteenth-century horizon of imagination. In addition to well-known statements of figures like Thomas Edison, Rubery examines popular accounts of "bottled authors" and hypothetical reading machines. The second section concerns the development of talking books for the blind community. This section has a robust connection to recent literature in the field of sound studies, where important work by scholars like Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne has explored the rela-

² Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Timothy H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).